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What is a novena?

Question: "What is a novena?"

Answer: The word *novena* derives from the Latin word for “nine.” A novena is a series of prayers prayed over a nine-day or nine-hour period. The prayers are repeated to obtain special graces or as a sign of devotion to God. Usually a novena involves making a specific request or expressing a specific intent. Prayers may come from the rosary or from prayer books, or they may be written by the petitioner. Usually the same prayer is prayed every day for nine days, or the same series of prayers is prayed. A nine-day novena has prayers made at the same time each day; a nine-hour novena has a prayer at the same time each hour. Novenas are primarily practiced by Catholics, although some members of the Orthodox, Anglican, and Lutheran churches also say novenas.

There are, in general, four categories of novenas. Mourning novenas are said following the death of a loved one; a special *novemdiales* is said following the death of a pope. Preparation novenas are said before a major religious holiday, such as Easter or Christmas. Prayer novenas are said to obtain special graces, and may consist of prayers from prayer books, recitation of the rosary, or other small prayers through the day. Indulgence novenas are prayed to alleviate the temporal punishment for one’s sins, including the sins of those in purgatory. Novenas are often prayed to specific saints and may be

public or private; public ones require special mass attendance or the daily lighting of a candle. The supposed efficacy of a novena depends on the piety and devotion of the individual performing it. Most Catholics resent the superstitious supposition that a novena is a sort of spiritual chain letter, the idea that saying a novena for a given amount of time virtually guarantees that one's request will be granted.

The novena is perhaps loosely derived from Scripture. It is thought that the time between the ascension of the Lord Jesus and the coming of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost was nine days. [Acts 1:14](#) says that the disciples spent that time continuing "with one accord in prayer." However, the ancient Romans also observed a nine-day period of prayer following the death of a loved one, or to avert some evil predicted by a soothsayer. Ultimately, the novena is based more on tradition than on Scripture, which contains a prohibition against "vain repetition" in prayer ([Matthew 6:7-8](#)). The concept behind novenas is not explicitly unbiblical, but the prayer content in the vast majority of novenas is unbiblical. It is true that we are exhorted to pray continually ([Luke 18:1-8](#); [1 Thessalonians 5:17](#)). However, we need to be sure that our prayers are thoughtful, God-centered and God-honoring.

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